



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

ANIMALS AGAINST FIRE

Good old Benjamin Franklin gave us one of our first slogans - "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." He publicized it in a magazine entitled "Poor Richards Almanac" as early as the 1730's. Unfortunately very few humans have been really successful in carrying out fire prevention messages to society. For some reason or other that seems to work better if an animal delivers it and not just any animal, but one that is associated with the fire service.

Earlier on we discussed the fact that when horses were brought into fire stations they were accompanied by Dalmatian dogs. In many fire stations around the country there were other forms of canine companionship that were not black and white. In a book that I have entitled "Firefighters and their pets" there were some of the ugliest animals that you have ever seen made into mascots in firehouses. But the Dalmatians had a real good reason for being there. Essentially they are called "Coach Dogs" because of their propensity for working around horses. A modern version of the Dalmatians relationship with large horses could be seen in the Anheuser Busch Clydesdale Team. Originally bred to travel along side of the horses or between running under the axle of coaches Dalmatians were perfect companions for the horses but also loyal to the fire service. In a Post Magazine cover of a female Dalmatian is seen to be looking as a motorized fire apparatus leaves the fire station with its gaggle of volunteers while she sits there attending her litter of puppies.

The horses left, the dog stayed. Moreover, the dog began to get a voice. I haven't determined exactly when this occurred but whoever called the first Dalmatian Sparky set in motion a trend that has superseded the experiences of several generations of firefighters.

The dogs alone can carry all of the messages that need to be portrayed. Another animal that joined the panel was a survivor of a fire. In a forest fire in New Mexico in 1948 a small bear cub was retrieved by a ranger from the edge of the fire. The pitiful little cub had apparently been separated from its parents and was found to be badly burned about its feet and its fur singed.

Inasmuch as one of the biggest efforts in the late 1940's was to save as much of the nations natural resource as possible someone came up with the bright idea of basing a public education campaign on the bear. Soon dubbed "Smokey Bear" the cub became a national celebrity almost overnight. It should be noted that Smokey Bear is not called Smokey the Bear. As was pointed out to me once you wouldn't refer to Easter the Bunny or Santa the Claus. It is Smokey Bear.

His slogan became so recognizable that it probably doesn't even need to be repeated in the text of this book. But the message he sent became incredibly powerful. I have often heard it said that Smokey put a guilt trip on an entire series of generations in the United States.



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Smokey was put on postage stamps, posters and even had his own zip code for the receipt of mail.

What both of these animals have in common is an appeal to younger people. While fire prevention and code enforcement is an incredibly technical field, fire prevention as a public message is one that must be carried to the youngest generation possible if it is ever going to reside in the minds of adults. Therefore, the hero's of fire prevention have almost always been four legged. Both Sparky and Smokey are getting a little long in the tooth. Both of these images have been around now for over fifty years.

One attempt to modify this concept was proposed by a former Smokey Bear advocate - Punky McClellan. Punky McClellan was a forest service employee whose job it was to package and market fire prevention messages. Fully realizing that there was a significant change in the message that delivered to our youngest citizens, he incorporated a "super hero" type image called the "Preventor." Appearing in posters and comic book versions the Preventor was a robot like character that took his message to the youth without needing an animal interpreter.